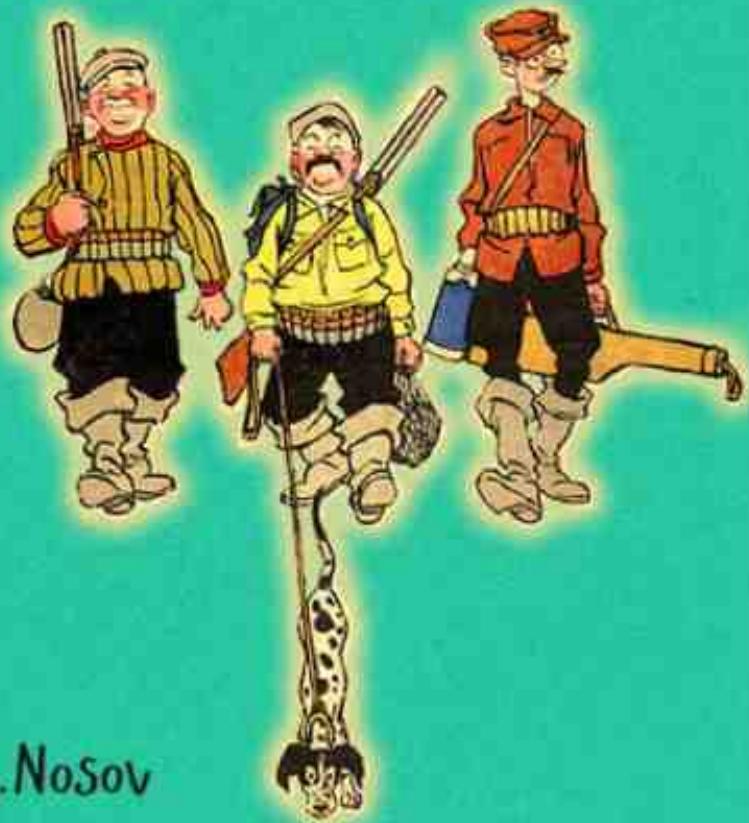


THREE Jolly Hunters



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There were once three jolly hunters, Uncle Vanya, Uncle Fedya and Uncle Kuzma. One day they went into the forest. They walked for hours and saw all sorts of wild animals, but did not kill any. Then they decided to have a rest. They settled down on the green grass and began to tell stories about interesting things that had happened to them.



The first to tell a story was Uncle Vanya.

"Listen to this," he said. "It happened a long time ago. One winter's day I went into the forest. I didn't have a gun then, 'cos I was just a young lad. Suddenly I saw a wolf. A real biggun! I took to my heels. The wolf must have seen that I didn't have a gun, 'cos it started chasing me.



" 'He's too fast for me,' I thought.

"I saw a tree and started scrambling up it. The wolf tried to get its teeth into me, but he only tore my trousers.



I climbed up the tree and sat on a branch, shaking with fright, while the wolf sat on the ground below, looking up at me and licking his chops.

" 'Never mind' I thought. 'I'll stay up here until evening. When the wolf goes to sleep, I'll creep away?'

"But by evening another wolf had come and they took it in turns to keep watch. While one slept, the other kept guard so I didn't run away. A bit later a third wolf arrived. Then another and another. In the end there was a whole pack of them at the foot of the tree. They sat there gnashing their teeth at me, waiting for me to fall down.



"Towards morning it got bitter cold. About forty below. My arms and legs were frozen stiff. I lost my balance on the branch and fell down. Bang, crash! The pack of wolves rushed at me, and I heard a loud cracking sound.

" 'That must be my bones a-cracking,' I thought.

"Then I realized the snow beneath me had caved in. I went tumbling down and landed in a den. It turned out to belong to a bear. Brother Bruin woke up, lumbered out of his den in alarm, saw the wolves and turned on them. In no time at all he drove them all away.



"I picked up my courage and peeped out of the den.



There was no sign of the wolves, so I took to my heels and ran all the way home. Mum darned the hole in my trousers, so you could hardly see it. And when he heard what had happened Dad bought me a gun straightaway, so I never roamed round the forest again without one. That's when I first became a hunter."

Uncle Fedya and Uncle Kuzma laughed at Uncle Vanya being scared by the wolves. Then Uncle Fedya began his story.

"I once got an awful fright from a bear too. Only it was in summer. One day I went into the forest and forgot my gun at home. Suddenly I saw a bear lumbering towards me. I took to my heels and he began to chase me. I ran fast, but the bear ran faster. I could hear him panting behind me. So I turned round, pulled off my cap and threw it at him.



The bear stopped for a moment, sniffed the cap and then started chasing me again.



I knew he would catch me up soon. And I still had a long way to go. So I wriggled out of my jacket as I ran and threw it at him.

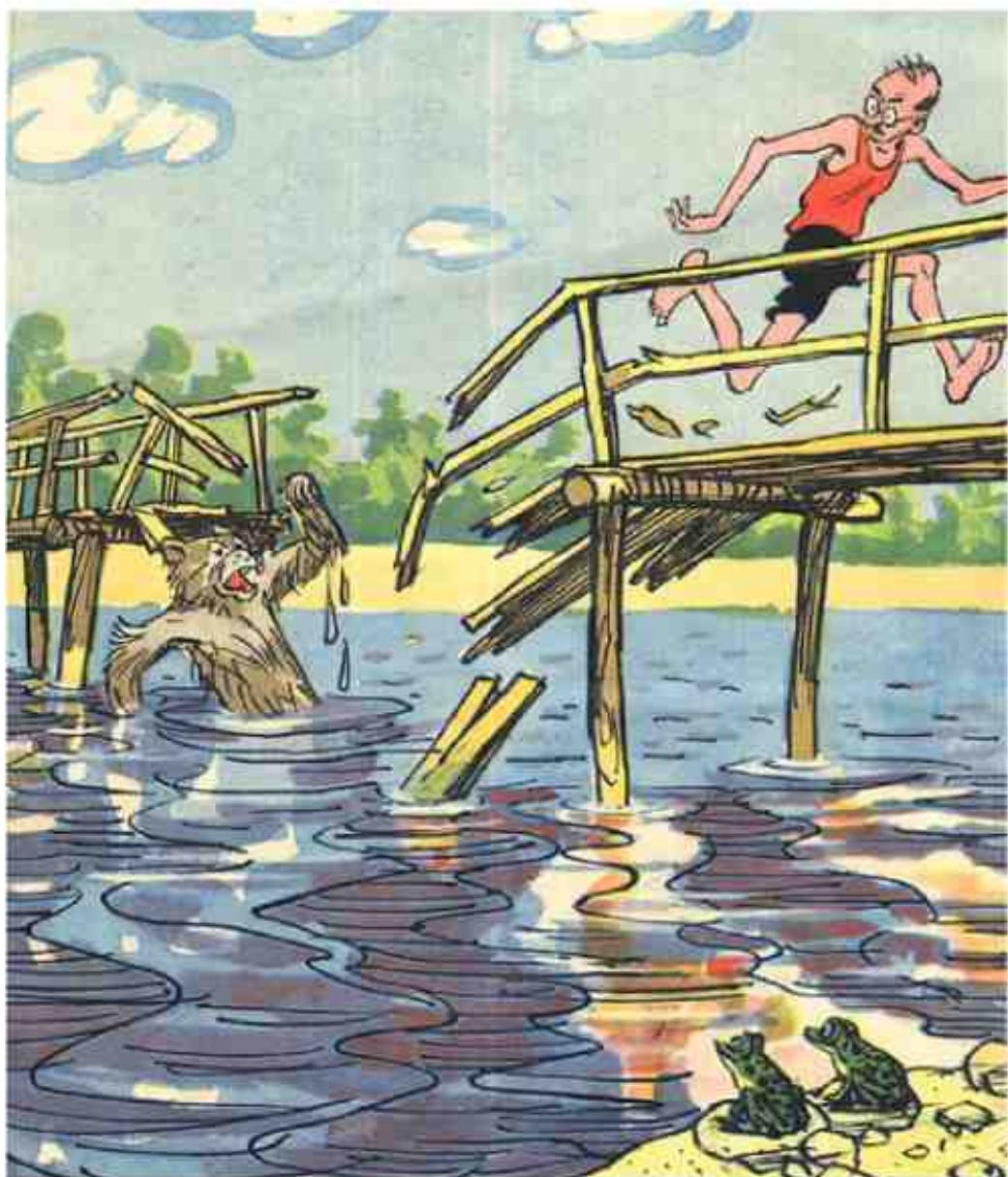
" 'That should stop him for a minute or two,' I thought.



"The bear clawed the jacket to pieces, saw there was nothing to eat in it, and set off after me again. I threw him my trousers and boots. There was nothing else for it. I had to save my skin.



"I ran out of the forest in my vest and pants. Ahead of me was a stream with a bridge over it. No sooner had I crossed the bridge than I heard a cracking sound. I looked round and saw the bridge collapse under the bear who fell into the water with a great splash.



" 'Serves you right, you old devil,' I thought. 'That'll teach you to go frightening innocent folk.'

"Only it wasn't very deep under the bridge. The bear climbed out onto the bank, shook himself hard and ambled back into the forest.

" 'Good for you, Uncle Fedya,' I said to myself. 'You fooled him good and proper. But how am I going to get home? People will see me wearing next to nothing and laugh themselves silly.'

"I decided to sit in the bushes and go home when it got dark. So I hid in the bushes until evening, then crept out and set off home. Whenever I saw someone coming towards me, I hid behind a corner, skulking there in the dark out of sight.

"At long last there was my house. I felt everywhere for the key to open the door, but I couldn't find it. It was in my jacket pocket. And I'd thrown my jacket to the bear. I should have taken the key out first.

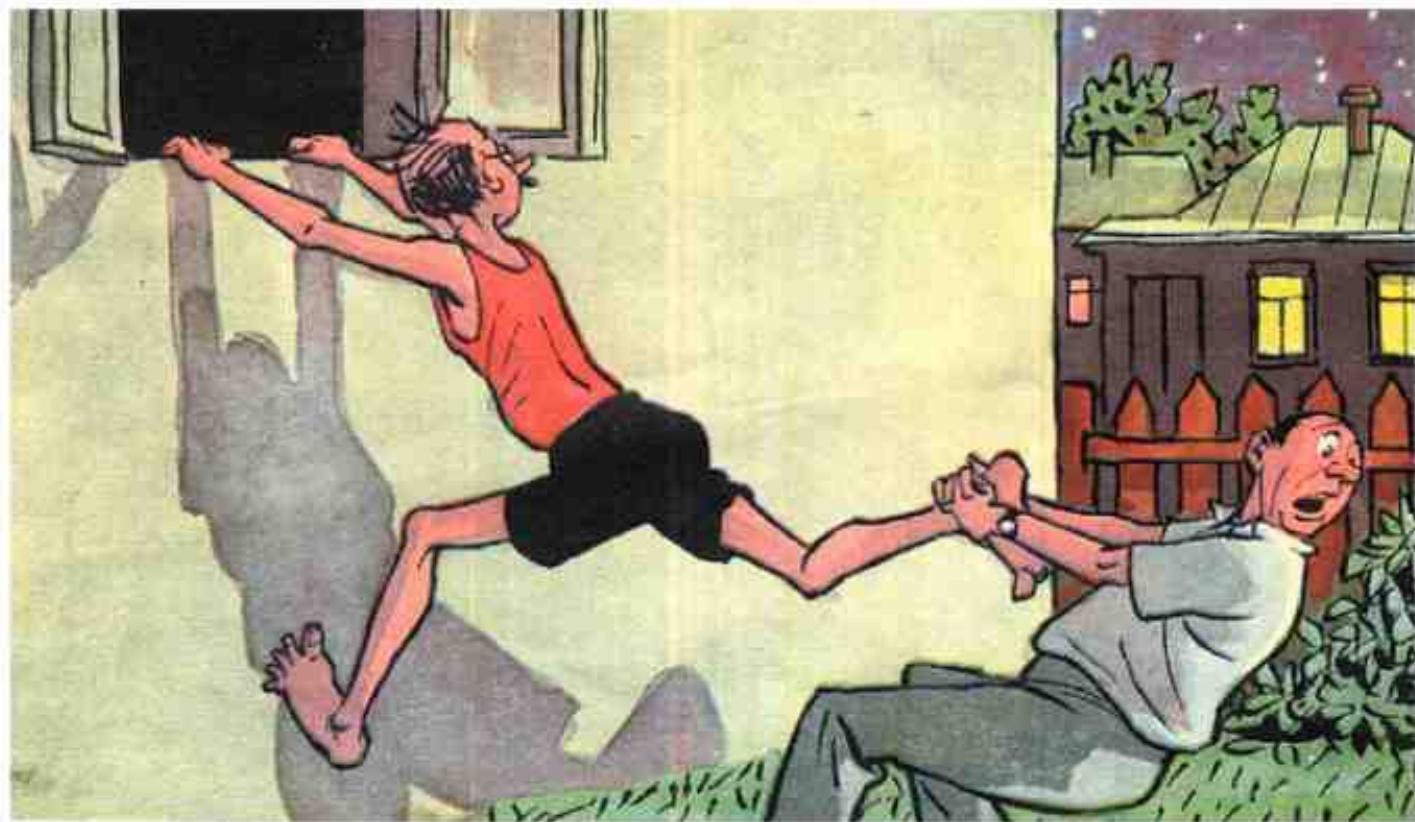
"What could I do? I tried to knock the door down, but it was too strong.

" 'I can't spend the night out here,' I thought.

"So I broke a window pane and began to climb in.

"Suddenly someone grabbed hold of my legs and yelled with all his might:

" 'Stop thief! Stop thief!'



"People came running up.

" 'Stop him! It's a thief. He was climbing in the window!' they shouted.

" 'Take him to the police-station,' cried others.

" 'No need to take me to the police-station, my hearties,' I said. 'It's my own house.'

" 'Don't take any notice of him, lads,' said the one who had grabbed me. 'I've been watching him for some time. He keeps hiding in dark corners. First he tried to knock the door down, then he started to climb through the window.'

"A policeman appeared and they all started telling him what had happened.

" 'Let's see your identity papers,' the policeman said to me.



" 'I don't have any identity papers,' I told him. 'The bear ate them.'

" 'Cut out the wisecracks! How could a bear have eaten them?'

"I wanted to explain, but nobody would listen.

"Then my neighbour Aunty Dasha came out to see what all the noise was about. She saw me and said:

" 'Let him go. That's Uncle Fedya, our neighbour. He really does live in this house.'

"The policeman believed her and let me go.

"Next day I bought myself a new suit, cap and boots. And I've lived happily ever after in my fine new clothes."

Uncle Vanya and Uncle Kuzma laughed at Uncle Fedya's adventures. Then Uncle Kuzma said:

"I met a bear once too. It was in winter. I went into the forest, saw this bear and shot him with my gun — bang! The bear fell to the ground. So I put him on my sledge and set off home. It was hard work dragging him through the village on my sledge. But the village lads gave me a hand.



"So I got the bear home and left him in the yard. My little son Igor saw him and gawped with surprise.

"But my wife said:

" 'That's good! We'll skin it and make you a bearskin coat.'

"Then my wife and son went to have tea. I was just about to skin the bear, when our dog Trickster rushed into the yard and sank its teeth into the bear's ear. The bear leapt up and growled. He hadn't been dead at all, only stunned with fright from my shot.

"Trickster got scared and ran into his kennel. The bear turned on me. I took to my heels. Then I saw the henhouse ladder and climbed up it onto the roof.

The bear lumbered up after me onto the roof, which caved in and sent the two of us flying into the henhouse. The hens got an awful fright. They clucked like mad and flew off in all directions.

"I ran out of the henhouse and into my home with the bear hot on my heels. I went into the room, and he followed. Then I tripped on the table and knocked it over. The dishes slid onto the floor and the samovar too. Igor hid under the sofa.

"Seeing there was no escape I collapsed onto the bed and closed my eyes tight. The bear lumbered up, shook me with one paw and roared:

" 'Get up quick! Get up!'



"I opened my eyes and saw that it was my wife.

" 'Get up,' she said. 'It's long past daybreak. You wanted to go hunting today.'

"I got up and went hunting, but I didn't see any more bears that day. And I lived happily ever after, eating bread with my cabbage soup and showing off my nice new suit, so there!"

Uncle Vanya and Uncle Fedyia had a good laugh at this story. And Uncle Kuzma laughed with them.

Then the three of them set off home.

"We did have a nice day's hunting, didn't we? We didn't kill a single wild beast, but we had a very jolly time."

"I don't like killing animals," said Uncle Fedyia. "All those little hares, and squirrels, and hedgehogs and foxes should live in the forest in peace. They shouldn't be hunted."

"And the birds should live in peace too," said Uncle Kuzma. "The forest would be a sad place without animals and birds. None of them should be hunted. We should love animals, not kill them."

See what nice jolly hunters they were!



